

Towards a shared future

(3) Irreconcilable Identities?

Compiled by

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Introduction

This is the third in an ongoing series of pamphlets on the theme *Towards a shared future*. The first two pamphlets had revealed a growing disquiet among community activists. Within the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community much of this disquiet related to perceived threats to their ‘British identity’ and the lack of any purposeful process to deal with both the legacy of the conflict and sectarianism. Within the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican community much of the anxiety was focused on the lack of any real socio-economic ‘peace dividend’.

Distribution of the two pamphlets had hardly commenced when, as if in confirmation of the fears expressed, the ‘flag protests’ erupted. They came about after a vote was taken (03.12.12) in Belfast City Council on a Sinn Féin and SDLP proposal that the Union flag, which was flown every day on the City Hall, should not be flown at all. These two parties would have required the support of the Alliance Party to carry the vote, but the latter proposed a compromise: that the flag should only be flown on 18 designated days (the Queen’s birthday and other State occasions), just as it was flown over Parliament Buildings at Stormont.

In advance of the vote, members of the two main unionist parties, the Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party, distributed 40,000 leaflets calling on people to protest to Alliance Party representatives about this perceived threat to their British identity. They could hardly have anticipated the result. Weekly, widespread road blockages across Northern Ireland (still ongoing), the worst riots seen for many years, scores of policemen injured, Alliance Party constituency offices torched and their representatives threatened, bullets posted to politicians, and inter-communal violence (focused on Short Strand) in East Belfast.

The theme for this third pamphlet – *Irreconcilable Identities?* – had been determined before the flag protests commenced but the discussions on which it is based were dominated by them. At the very least, the ‘flag issue’ has served to highlight the need for politicians, policy-makers, community workers and others to address the matter of our conflicting identities as a matter of urgency.

[Because the ‘flag issue’ has dominated this third pamphlet, to the detriment of a wider discussion on identity, a fourth pamphlet is being published simultaneously, which looks at identity, culture and history in greater depth.]

Michael Hall *Farset Community Think Tanks Co-ordinator*

Irreconcilable Identities?

The following quotes were gathered during a series of separate discussions involving small groups of community activists. Given the immediacy of the 'flag protest' it was inevitable that there would be overlap in the opinions expressed (as there was in the questions posed), but this only served to confirm the flag issue as an important barometer of feelings surrounding the question of identity.

The Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community

Discussion 1

- This is the first in a series of discussions exploring what 'identity' means to people, and whether or not, as we hopefully move towards a shared future, our respective identities can be reconciled. Anyone like to start?
- *Each one of us* possesses multiple identities. I have a Protestant identity, I have a British identity, and growing up on an interface during the Troubles I also developed a sectarian identity. Everybody I saw on the other side of the road was either in the IRA or supported the IRA, and to me their sole aim was to kill people in my community or British soldiers and policemen. I had neighbours killed in the bombings and shootings – so there was always plenty of justification for being sectarian. We dehumanised one another during the Troubles. I did not see the people across the road in Ardoyne as human beings, but Taigs or IRA scum.
- I went to England when I was sixteen, and joined the military like others in my family. The thing that struck me was that nobody over there cared what religion you were. I remember thinking: wouldn't it be great if Northern Ireland was like that? England's not perfect by any means, but people weren't trying to find out what your religion was. Unlike here, where they try to guess your religion by your name, or by seeing how you pronounce 'h', or asking what school you went to... all that crap we were used to here.
- Everybody has the right to have whatever identity they choose, and to hold to whatever beliefs and aspirations they want. The problem in Northern Ireland is that people do not respect one another's identities. I can remember driving down the Falls Road and there was a republican parade taking place. Now, it didn't offend me. I could have said: maybe some of them fellas killed my mates. But on that occasion they weren't doing me any harm and I had no problem with it.

I have an acceptance of their beliefs now and their culture, but it doesn't seem to be the other way around. Now, I'm not saying that all republicans are like that.

- Take the flag on Belfast City Hall: we are one of the regional capitals of the United Kingdom, and our flag is the Union Jack. You have Sinn Féin and SDLP councillors saying: well, I am not a bit happy with that being up there, it offends me. If I went to live in Dublin you wouldn't see me asking: could you take that Tricolour down, it offends me because of what the IRA did in its name. Or if I went to live in Germany and said: look, you killed our people during the War, could you take your national flag down?
- Yes, but the people who wanted the flag down were born here, they are part of this society. The reality is that this is a mixed society, with different identities, so do you accept that the symbols we use should reflect that?
- The flag issue doesn't bother me. The way I look at it not only are Sinn Féin administering Partition in the North, but they have agreed to fly the Union flag to celebrate the Queen's birthday and other similar occasions.
- Sinn Féin have never agreed that, and still don't. They have *temporarily* accepted an Alliance Party compromise which will see it fly on designated days. But it will not be long before they agitate to have it taken down completely.
- The College of Arms, which determines the protocol for the flying of the Union flag, says that the flag *shouldn't* be flown every single day because it only demeans it; it should only be flown on special days to celebrate official occasions.
- There is a view within the loyalist/unionist community that Sinn Féin and the SDLP want to rid the Protestant and unionist and loyalist culture out of Northern Ireland completely. They started with the parades, now they're on to flags. People are asking: what's next? That's why people are getting angry. There is also anger at the promotion of a romanticised republican interpretation of the thirty years of violence, which they present as being everybody's fault but theirs. Then you have a children's play-park in Newry getting named after an IRA gunman and stuff like that. How would the nationalist community feel if we named a play-park after one of the Greysteel gunmen, or the likes of Michael Stone? They wouldn't be too happy. There is a righteousness from republicans and nationalists: they claim that they were basically nice people, who were hard done by, and all the problems came from them bad Protestants.

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And the RUC was totally bad, and the British Army were all murderers. When they start on the old 'Collusion is no Illusion' business, where's Scapattichi? Where's the demands for enquiries into *their* British intelligence agents? They

killed Denis Donaldson before he could spill the beans. I feel sorry for *anyone* who has lost anybody through the Troubles, but I don't like *selective* enquiries. And they are not about republican atrocities: the Oxford Street bombing, Bloody Friday, La Mon... none of that – they're all about what happened to one side of the community. We *all* suffered, we *all* did terrible things to one another... but if an outsider was to look at the list of enquiries they would assume that everything bad was done by our side.

- The problem with identity is that people usually view their own identity from a position of righteousness: my identity is right, yours is wrong.
- I think that our beliefs are a product of our environment. How many British unionists are born on the Falls Road? How many Irish republicans are born on the Shankill?
- I accept that there is a conditioning process going on. As children we copy what our parents do, but once we become adults we do make choices.
- But do we really? The evidence shows that 99% of people hold to the same religion as their parents. And that goes for *all* religions.
- There is also group identity, and the security that brings, the sense of belonging.
- The need to hold to a group identity can often prevent us from questioning things. When we think we are right, we don't question. See when you get people, even myself, and start to question them about aspects of their identity, it can be very uncomfortable. Because you will always find things which do not sit right, or don't fit in with your romanticised version of your beliefs.

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- I will be perfectly honest. When I was in the Army they all called me 'Irish', that was my name: the 'mad Irishman'. I didn't feel offended by that, I was contented within my Britishness, but I had no problem with also being seen as Irish.
- See when I was in England, not too many people there even knew the words of *The Queen*. When you joined the Army you had to write an essay on why you wanted to join. It was partly to see what your motivations were, in case there was something dodgy in your character. There were 90 people in my intake, and *only three* of them wrote about their Britishness – and all three were from Northern Ireland! As for the rest of them: couldn't get a job, thought I would get a trade, good wages... but nothing about their Britishness.
- Either you rule your identity or it rules you. Years ago my identity ruled me. When I first started in community work I had an abiding hatred for republicans.

Every time I saw one I felt the need to attack them, if not physically at least verbally. I would be going to meetings about things which were happening in the community and there were opportunities there for useful joint work, but I couldn't see them, for my identity was getting in the way. My identity as a loyalist told me: I have to attack him, fight him at every opportunity. Whatever else was in that meeting I was oblivious to it, I couldn't hear it. All I was interested in was in one of them saying a wrong thing that would allow me to get into a real f**king argument, with the result that nothing was being achieved. So, that is a question everybody has to ask themselves: does your identity rule you, or do you rule your identity?

Discussion 2

- The flag issue isn't a real issue. The flag only flies on designated days at Stormont, and nobody has ever kicked up a fuss about it. I believe it's more a reflection of the complete disconnect between the politicians and the people; there is no relationship there at all.
- I can understand the anger; the Unionist community are getting their noses rubbed in the dirt. I mean, we hear all these things about 'forgetting the past and moving on', but day and daily it's more enquiries into this, more enquiries into that. No enquiries into atrocities like the murder of the three young Scottish soldiers. One of the main suspects for that fled down South, but when the police tried to extradite him, the response from the Republic was: 'Oh, we can't do that, that was a political crime.' *Political* crime? Shooting three teenagers in the back of the head at the side of the road? Apparently that wasn't murder, that was a political act to advance the cause of Irish freedom! That's where fighting for our respective identities can take us all: down a cul-de-sac of murder and mayhem.
- When you look at the catalogue of atrocities perpetrated during the Troubles.. and yet former members of the IRA now stand up at Stormont and demand that we 'respect' them. I'm sorry; I don't reject them because they are Catholics. Nor do I reject them because they are Irish republicans, or nationalists... or anything like that. I reject them because they have an absolute cheek! The same goes for the atrocities committed on Catholics by loyalist paramilitaries. And as for our Unionist politicians: they knew all along what was going on; they're chancers too. Unless all these people admit that it was all wrong, and show genuine remorse, I can't see how we can ever move to a genuinely shared future.
- Between the lot of them they have almost destroyed the voluntary sector, ruined *genuine* 'peace & reconciliation'. The days of the Peace People, Ciaran McKeown, Dessie Ford, Joe Mulvenna, Joe Camplisson... all those community people who were concerned about finding ways forward and showing some leadership... it's largely all dead. It's sad. That's why your pamphlets are so refreshing, so

important, because in them there are snippets of that forgotten story. I remember the one you did for the Shankill Convention, and part of it described a discussion which involved a group of women who had been asked to look at graffiti and murals. And it started off slow, then one girl had the courage to say what she really felt: ‘We don’t want our children living in a place with guns, or all those intimidating murals with hooded men staring down at us from every gable wall. We want them removed.’ And my heart just lifted, it really did.

- The only saving grace is that there are many ex-combatants, from both sides, who are genuinely trying to work towards building peace, and they deserve to be supported in their efforts.

- In our own work with young people we didn’t set out with grandiose notions, we just provided space for them to come together to discuss everyday issues, including questions of culture and identity. And I am convinced that most of those young people left those interactions with a more positive view of the ‘other’ community, of one another’s identities. We were working away slowly, without fuss. And then what happened? All these high-powered agencies appeared – conflict resolution experts, conflict transformation specialists, academics with highfaluting theories, funders who only wanted to hear of programmes which promised magic solutions to the problem of sectarianism. The result? Absolute chaos. The way I describe it is that all

these people – these specialists, academics, funders, even some ex-combatants – were running around with tins of ‘brilliant white’ gloss paint. Everything they did – so they told us – was brilliant, and they slapped a coat of white gloss on it to show how brilliant it was. But behind the paint? The same old cracked, peeling, sectarian society that was there before. Instead of properly preparing the walls, as any good decorator would do, they just slapped this white gloss

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everywhere. Like one of those 24-hour make-over programmes on TV. And when the paint eventually began to peel off, the reality underneath was shown to be the same as before, if not worse. But in the process they had almost emasculated the community sector, sidelined those who had been prepared for the long haul.

Discussion 3

- There is a Sinn Féin/republican agenda about taking away symbols that remind people about their British identity, and I don’t think it’s by accident, I think it’s a strategy. All these wee things, taken in isolation, might not mean anything,

but they form a pattern. For a lot of Protestants it is an erosion of their identity.

- I have talked to a lot of Protestants/loyalists/unionists who feel their identity is under threat. The problem is that when I ask them *what exactly* is being taken away from them, I am not always getting clear answers. ‘We can’t march where we used to.’ Well, is that really your identity being lost, or just a product of demographic population changes? ‘They are taking our flag down from the City Hall.’ But it has been pointed out by the College of Arms that it is not a British tradition to have it flying every day over government buildings, for it demeans the flag. So how exactly is Britishness being taken away?

- To go back to the idea of a strategy, that strategy is to erode our identity so that some day, when republicans try to stamp *their* identity completely on this island, it will be so much easier to do that. And the media are assisting in this process. You never hear about ‘our Northern Ireland correspondent’ any more, it is always ‘our Ireland correspondent.’ Tell me this: what did ‘UTV’ stand for when we were younger?

- Ulster Television.

- What does it stand for now?

- Is it not still Ulster Television?

- No, it was rebranded in 2006 as simply ‘UTV plc’. They deliberately dropped the ‘Ulster’ part. Queen’s University no longer plays the National Anthem on graduation days. The Crown’s coat of arms was removed from the majority of Northern Ireland’s courts... It’s a gradual, creeping process.

- Sinn Féin’s strategy is insensitive, in that the week the flag vote was taken was before the end of the year in which the centenary of the Covenant had been celebrated. I believe that there could have been more tact shown. And the same week of that vote, Sinn Féin councillors in Newry voted to name a children’s playground after Raymond McCreesh, and everyone knows that the Armalite he was found in possession of when arrested had been used in the Kingmills massacre. That to me isn’t an accident either. Their strategy is: get symbols of Britishness out, and get symbols of Irish nationalism/republicanism in. What they are doing is getting rid of British symbols in places where they can, so that they can convince their voters that they are still pursuing their ultimate goal of a united Ireland. Look at the list of things Sinn Féin councillors wanted removed from Limavady council offices a few years ago [2008].† What does that say about Sinn Féin’s interpretation of a ‘*shared future*’?

† Two Sinn Féin members of Limavady council drew up a list of items they would like removed from the council offices. It included a ‘Charles and Di’ wedding cup, a Royal Engineers paperweight, a plate decorated with the insignia of the 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment, and a small toy dragon, a gift from the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards; as well as the removal, from outside the building, of a statue of local Orangeman William Massey, who had become Prime Minister of New Zealand.

- It is like the time Gerry Adams was caught on saying that the parading problem ‘didn’t come about by accident, you know. A lot of hard work went into it.’† Their strategy wasn’t really to get into talks with the Orange Order, but to show that the Orange Order wouldn’t talk. It was no accident that, in relation to the three most contentious parades, the residents’ spokespersons were all former IRA prisoners. They wanted a strategy that showed up the intransigence of the Orange, and they deliberately made it all the harder for them to even contemplate talks. The difficulty with that strategy is that it is now a problem for Sinn Féin, for the war is over and they don’t really want people mobilised on the streets. The dissidents are using it instead to build support in their areas. Sinn Féin want the parades issue put to bed, but they initiated the problem in the first place.
- The Orange Order also have to accept that, historically, they have been part of the problem. Some of their members have been openly sectarian in their attitudes and behaviour, but instead of those in leadership positions honestly owning up to that fact – apart from a few individuals with some integrity – it is largely ignored or even denied. In that respect they’re just like Sinn Féin, who never admit to any of their members ever having acted in a sectarian manner.
- The Order don’t even seek the opinion of people in *our* community, and the fact is that plenty of people in the Protestant community are inconvenienced by some of the parades also.
- I also get angry and frustrated with our side; they can’t see past their own noses sometimes. There are too many different agendas being played out. And when they get together they basically gravitate to the lowest common denominator, which is ‘not an inch’. And they don’t even realise that what they are doing is making an accommodation even harder. In this project we had been in serious discussions with a nationalist residents’ group, and one of the Orange Order leaders asked me what was on the table from the other side. I told him we had come up with a number of proposals which I believed held great potential for facilitating an accommodation. And when I told him what they were he said to me, ‘What! I’d have given my right arm for that!’ I said: ‘And what’s more you’ll get it copper-fastened for three years, and in those three years you sit and negotiate around the feel-good factor and how to move it forward.’ And he was really enthusiastic and said to me, ‘I’ll certainly take that back to my group.’ But what happened? They dug their heels in, and a great opportunity was thrown away. To me, that comes down to a lack of leadership. There are few people within loyalism can give proper leadership.

† According to the *Irish Times* (05.03.97), RTÉ’s *Prime Time* programme quoted Gerry Adams as telling Sinn Féin members in Athboy: “Ask any activist in the north, ‘did Drumcree happen by accident?’, and he will tell you, ‘no’... Three years of work on the lower Ormeau Road, Portadown and parts of Fermanagh and Newry, Armagh and in Bellaghy and up in Derry... Three years of work went into creating that situation and fair play to those people who put the work in. They are the type of scene changes that we have to focus on and develop and exploit.”

Discussion 4

- The DUP and the UUP share a big responsibility for what has developed over the flag issue. They instigated the whole process with their scare-mongering and their 40,000 leaflets attacking the Alliance Party. They let the genie out of the bottle and now they can't get it back in again. It's just the latest example of the way in which the mainstream Unionist parties have sought to use and manipulate the Protestant working class; they did it throughout the Troubles. The problem is that the reactions they would have welcomed before don't suit them any more.

It's just the latest example of the way in which the mainstream Unionist parties have sought to use and manipulate the Protestant working class; they did it throughout the Troubles.

- Trying to analyse the vote from a republican perspective, I think the Shinnars looked on it as a bit of oneupmanship by them, to say to their community: 'We are still making headway; there's another brick taken out of the wall – there's the flag partly gone.' They're saying to their community: 'We're still making progress, we're still in there fighting.' To stop the dissidents making inroads in their community. 'Look, we're still at the coalface: you wouldn't have got this if we had still been in armed conflict.' I don't think they realised how deeply it would have hit.

- It came at a point when Sinn Féin had been making headway, and now all of a sudden the brakes have been put on their community-relations efforts between the communities. All the hard work that has gone on over recent years has been damaged. It's like a marriage, when you find out your partner has been having an affair behind your back and you realise that trust will never be there again. Although you might still maintain the marriage, you will forever look at your partner with a suspicious eye. I think we will now always look at the republican leadership with suspicion, asking: what are they *really* up to? We will hopefully manage to live peacefully side by side, but intermingling is now a non-starter. I think the other thing too was that people stepped back from the flag protest and allowed it to take on its own life. From the political parties and the loyalist paramilitaries it was a case of 'we really don't want to get involved in this', and it grew too quickly and manifested itself into something ugly. Nobody was able to get any control over it. And I think the hardest thing now is: where's the escape route? How do you stop it without losing face? The flag will not go back up, so where is the 'out'?

- I don't think it is solely about the flag issue, I think that was just the catalyst that started it all off, the touchpaper that lit the fuse. I think it has now developed into something more than just flags, it's about all the fears people have about their British identity being taken away.

- But *how* is the British identity being taken away?
 - I think people have to first of all ask themselves: what *is* their British identity? How do they express it? I have been asking groups of young people this question for years, and to many of them their British identity is following Linfield or wearing a Rangers top. As to their understanding of what British culture is, to be honest, many of them don't know what it is other than on a superficial level.
 - But if they don't know exactly what it is, how can they know if it is being taken away? Is it all to do with symbols?
 - Yes, symbolism is everything.
 - The irony is that in the last pamphlet it was a Catholic priest who offered the most positive comments about the fundamental impact Protestantism had made on European and world history. But whenever I ask Protestants to define their Protestant or British identity, few of them ever talk about its historical significance – the response invariably centres around *the symbols* of that identity.
 - The very core of our economic structure, Capitalism – whether you like it or not – would not have developed if there hadn't been the Protestant ethos. You wouldn't have had Irish Republicanism without Presbyterianism.
 - Unionism always had a negativity attached to it. Unionist leaders have always come across as people out for their own gain, who will trample over Catholics and manipulate working-class Protestant to get their way. We have never had leaders who could present a positive image of the Ulster Protestant community.
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- Assuming most Protestants want to see a settled, peaceful, shared future, how should the aspirations of the Catholic community be accommodated?
 - You are never going to get a Northern Ireland which will have a totally *shared* future, at most it will be like two railway tracks running in parallel. They might go forward together but I don't think they will ever merge together at any stage.
 - Sinn Féin representatives have been allowed to put over this notion that the Good Friday Agreement was all about 'parity of esteem', and that 'we recognise your Britishness.' But where was that parity of esteem when the Sinn Féin Lord Mayor from the Short Strand wouldn't shake the hand of a young army cadet at an awards ceremony? Where was a recognition of Britishness on that occasion?
 - The gunmen-type murals are being taken down in Loyalist areas, and replaced

by ones relating to culture – King William, Ulster Presidents of America, sporting heroes and all the rest of it – but not in nationalist areas. They're still focused on 'British Army brutality', 'Collusion'....

- Every person here needs a job, something which gives them a stake in their community, gives them prospects for the future. Many of the people who are out protesting on the streets about their British identity are probably unemployed; they don't have anything valuable to hold on to other than their cultural identity. But is that ever going to happen?
- I work with two local secondary schools and I am telling you now, we have major, major problems with 14-, 15-, 16-year-olds coming through today which is going to manifest itself in future years. They have no education, no skills, they will not be able to diversify on a career choice. If they can't get a job with a major employer as an ordinary unskilled worker they have no hope. I dealt with 60 kids from one school who came in here on job placements, and 59 of them had no qualifications at all. The future for the young people around here doesn't bear thinking about. They can't go on to higher education when they're older because they never had the basic education. They have no skills; these training schemes are just short-term slave labour.
- You have to say that this period we are now going through is very reminiscent of the 1960s, in the prelude to the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969. And I think what is happening now is that you're growing a dissident, disenfranchised section of the community who see conflict as the only way forward, that conflict does pay. But they have never experienced the conflict directly and don't know what it was like, while those of us who have been through it know that it is a quite different thing.

Discussion 5

- Identity is very important and I genuinely believe that our identity is being taken away. Republicans are nit-picking at everything we have got. Everything British about us they just don't want. They don't want anything to do with Britishness in this country at all; in fact, they probably don't even want *us* in this country.
- You say your identity is being taken away. Now, I understand your fear. But *what* is being taken away, and *how* is it being taken away?
- Taking the 'Royal' out of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Getting the Union flag taken down. Opposing traditional marches. Everything they can attack they do so. And a lot of it is to try and undermine the dissidents, trying to prove their anti-Brit credentials. It's all about Sinn Féin being able to say: 'Hold on, we've got rid of the RUC, the UDR, we've got the British military off the streets....'

It's all about maintaining their voting base, because there are a lot of people disillusioned within the republican movement as well, as we can see with the murders and attempted murders going on.

- To be honest, in many of the discussions I have had with Protestants/loyalists it sounds as if it is more the *symbols* of identity which are being taken away. Can you pinpoint anything deeper than that, anything more fundamental?
- You're probably right; I think it is just the symbols. To me, your identity is multifaceted, it is not just one single component. I also think your identity can change. John Hewitt talked about being 'a Belfastman, an Ulsterman, British, Irish and European – and if you take any one element of that away you strip me of part of my identity.' And that's how I would feel. People have said to me, 'Well, you're not Irish.' And I say, 'Of course I am, I was born in Ireland, I live in Ireland.' That is what I was born into, the rest of the trappings are things you choose. I would consider myself to be an Ulsterman, I would be British, but part of me also feels Irish, or Northern Irish. And *can* that identity be taken from me? It can't. The symbols can be tampered with or demeaned, but at the end of the day you are who you want to be.
- Identities can be complementary; they don't have to be in a state of perpetual animosity.

I would consider myself to be an Ulsterman, I would be British, but part of me also feels Irish, or Northern Irish. And can that identity be taken from me? It can't.

- But in working-class Protestant areas people don't see the bigger picture, they just see that their identity is being chipped away from them. I believe there will always be a British identity in Ireland but many people don't; they see us on the road to a united Ireland where any vestiges of Britishness have been eradicated.
- Honestly, I think most nationalists have given up on a united Ireland, they only pay lip-service to it. Those days are gone of 'Ourselves Alone' and the wee thatched cottages, and *Darby O'Gill and the Little People, The Quiet Man...* We are all Europeans now, whether we like it or not. I think that's where the future will lie, and we will eventually lose many of the wee traditions we currently cling on to. My son works in Dublin and down there people haven't the slightest interest in a united Ireland; they see themselves as Europeans.
- I often wonder whether republicans are taking our identity away from us, or are we handing it to them on a plate? There's so much in our DNA that we have given away. One thing which comes to mind is the language. We used to run Irish language classes in here. Purely because a friend of mine gave me a book called *Presbyterians and the Irish Language*, which knocked the socks off me. I had no idea about the relationships between Presbyterians in the 1700s and Irish. Ulster Irish and Scots Gaelic are very akin. And a lot of the Presbyterian churches

held their services in Irish. The relationship between the Irish language and the Presbyterian community was tight – and then we gave it away. And when we told people we ran Irish language classes on the Shankill Road, we got the usual: ‘f**king traitors!’ But no, we said – this was a part of our history and culture we wanted to reclaim. The United Irishmen is another part of our history that we want a share in. We have given all that away. We have let republicans steal the whole concept of the United Irishmen, ‘Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter’; we have let them take it, and yet the part we played in that was profound.

- Just look at St. Patrick’s Day. That has turned into a full republican parade. In West Belfast on St. Patrick’s Day they were walking along with hoods on.
- On the Fall Road there is a pub called *The Red Devils*, a Man United supporters club. And up and down the Falls you’ll see kids with their Man United tops, their Liverpool tops, Arsenal... whatever. So this hatred of ‘Britishness’ doesn’t obviously extend into football.
- There is this assumption that Ulster Protestants who feel themselves to be British somehow cannot relate to people who are Catholic or Irish. That is totally untrue. You ask about a shared future? Initially Protestants had a fear of the South, but that has all changed. Any of the numerous groups – from Protestant areas of Belfast – which have gone down there have got on really well. I think we could have a brilliant shared future with the people of the South – we could build a really close relationship between the two parts of this island. It is militant Irish republicans we cannot share with. Every time we go on a bus trip to the South we get on brilliantly, we find we have so much in common, there isn’t a problem about sharing anything. And quite often the people we meet there say that they have as much a problem with militant Irish republicanism as we do.
- What you say about the South is true. There is a pal of mine runs tours in Dublin called ‘A shared city’. He goes around Trinity, and the Bank of Ireland headquarters where they have the tapestries depicting the Battle of the Boyne, and the closing of the Gates. About four years ago we also took some old soldiers, an old comrades’ association, down to Islandbridge Memorial Gardens. Most of them had never set foot in the South in their lives and we took them down for an overnight. They got changed in the coach into their blazers and berets and they got out their standards. It was a beautiful summer’s day, and there were families all around having picnics. And they paraded up and laid a wreath – and all the families applauded them! They couldn’t believe this. I was down a month later and the wreaths were still there, untouched. So, I think you are right. I think there is a big difference between the rabid republicanism which we have in the North and the people of the South of Ireland who have a totally different view on the idea of Irishness and where Ireland now sits in the modern world.
- A friend of mine in Dublin coaches kids for Castleknock GAA club, and he said

that 20% of them are not indigenous Irish; they are Polish, African, Lithuanian, Bulgarian... whatever. Give us another generation and ask about identity and culture and you might get totally different takes on it. But there's still a long way to go up North. Take that young GAA player from South Armagh getting racist abuse. Or the young Prod from Fermanagh who played Gaelic, walking off the pitch because he was called an 'Orange bastard'. That doesn't happen in the South, but in the North racism and sectarianism is increasingly evident.

- Linfield used to get constant criticism when they were a totally Protestant team. I was over at a match recently and there were *six* Catholics playing for Linfield, whereas their opponents, Cliftonville, had only *one* Protestant playing for them. But nobody's on to them complaining about that. Linfield got it over the years, the Northern Ireland team got it, but the finger-pointing doesn't go the other way. And see that Neil Lennon incident. I was at the match when he got abused, but he didn't mention that while half the crowd was booing him the other half was shouting 'There's only one Neil Lennon!' When he was on the media he never mentioned that half the crowd was cheering in his favour. He just condemned the whole of the Northern Ireland supporters. I was at the game and even though I am a loyalist I was cheering on his behalf, because I don't think religion should be brought into sport. But he either refused or forgot to say that half the crowd was behind him.

- I think republicans are caught in a time warp, and they try to disguise that reality from their own community. Look at the number of people here now prepared to identify themselves as 'Northern Irish only', This is a modern democratic society and the time for 'Dear Ould Ireland' is past. A healthy modern society should try and accommodate *all* expressions of identity, and indeed should be very grateful to have all that. Wouldn't it be boring if we were all the same? If you had genuine diversity, not this oneupmanship, then that would be something to be valued. But we don't have that, and I don't think people here are working towards that. We fail to promote the progressive aspect of Protestantism. The 500th anniversary is coming up soon: 1517 was when Martin Luther pinned up his *Ninety-Five Theses* and sparked off the Reformation. Now, surely to God *that* should be celebrated. That changed the world. And because of the invention of the printing press it was the first time people could read the Bible for themselves, rather than be told by priests what was in it.

- It is 'their way or the high-way'. Sinn Féin get on TV and say they want to embrace the Protestant community, but I don't believe that for one minute. They just want to take away every aspect of our Britishness.

- This is the only country where former terrorists are part of the government, and we had to take that on the chin.

- Look at surnames. Adams, Sands, Morrison... all Planter surnames. All the

Fitzes – Fitzgerald, Fitzpatrick... all Norman. Costello, De Valera... Spanish. I can recall a big family of O’Boyles from the Shankill. We’re a real mixture here.

- One leading Sinn Féiner told me that he was fascinated with the Presbyterians, their legacy, and their role in the United Irishman. ‘In fact’, he said to me, ‘I could be quite comfortable being a Presbyterian.’ So, our identity is fluid. It has so many strands.

Discussion 6

- We are *not* a ‘single identity’ society, we are a society with divided allegiances, and we should not only accept that fact, but be willing to reflect it. Certainly, we are part of the United Kingdom, but a part in which the population holds different identities – we can’t put our heads in the sand and pretend otherwise. Also, as the recent Census shows, the percentage of Protestants is actually dropping, so that’s all the more reason not to rub the Union flag and other symbols in the faces of Catholics; they need to feel that staying with the Union is a reasonable option for them. But if some Prods/loyalists make it abundantly clear that Catholic/nationalist culture cannot be equally celebrated in a shared Northern Ireland, why would Catholics/nationalists want to see the Union continue? The greatest risk to the Union has always been our own actions. By acting bigoted and narrow-minded we could be actually hastening the demise of the very thing we seek to defend.

- The irony is that in today’s Ireland it is old-fashioned Irish nationalism which is losing ground. The institutions of government in the Republic are modelled on the British system. There’s *scores* of organisations still proud to use their Royal charters, from Royal Dublin Golf Club to the Royal Irish Academy of Music – even Royal Cork Yacht Club in the so-called ‘rebel county’. Boatloads of Man United and Liverpool fans flock to GB every year. The Queen was greeted warmly by practically everyone when she visited the Republic. The vast majority of people there do not have the hatred of everything British which still drives die-hard Irish republicans. Modern Ireland is a forward-looking, European nation. And certainly whatever appeal armed force republicanism may once have had has long gone. I can’t see why we [in the Protestant community] should feel so worried about threats to our Britishness and its ideals. It is old-style Irish nationalism and militant republicanism which should be feeling worried.

If some Prods/loyalists make it abundantly clear that Catholic/nationalist culture cannot be equally celebrated in a shared Northern Ireland, why would Catholics/nationalists want to see the Union continue?

- Look at the disconnect between the people here and mainland Britain. 2012

had been a year when hundreds of thousands of Union flags had been proudly waved throughout Britain – the Queen’s Jubilee celebrations, the Olympics, the Paralympics – and the media had been gushing about each ‘fantastic win for Team GB!’ But when people here fly the flag they are ridiculed across the water: to them we’re not waving the flag because we’re proud to be British, we’re just idiots, even bigots.

- We don’t owe the British *establishment* anything. Those aspects of Britishness we value most – the rule of law, equality, democratic institutions, free speech, fair play – were dragged screaming from the kings and queens, lord and rulers. Kings had to be put in their place by Parliament. Then parliament had to be democratised even further by the efforts of ordinary people. The exploitation of ordinary people by capitalism had to be fought by the labour movement. The things we hold up today as the epitome of British fair play and the rule of law had to be dragged screaming from the ruling establishment – and often they resisted with imprisonment or mounted police. The Britishness I adhere to is the *people’s* Britishness, not the ‘pomp and ceremony’ Britishness.

- The current flag protests will not only put off Catholics, but Protestants. My wife and I were watching *The Nolan Show* the other night [16.01.13]. And when we listened to those young loyalists, and their strident opinions, not wanting to let anyone else speak, we were appalled. And when one of those lads indicated that there was a new generation of young loyalists like him coming up who would not surrender their heritage my wife and I looked at each other. And she said, ‘Is that what our children have to look forward to? A whole new generation of politicians like them!’ And although she and I consider ourselves British, do you know what we both felt? That if there was a border poll tomorrow we’d vote for a united Ireland. Anything would be better than living in a Northern Ireland with another generation of Paisleyites trying to dictate our lives. I’m serious. Those so-called ‘loyalists’ don’t realise the immense harm they are doing to the Unionist cause, and our British identity.

2012 had been a year when hundreds of thousands of Union flags had been proudly waved throughout Britain. But when people here fly the flag they are ridiculed across the water: to them we’re not waving the flag because we’re proud to be British, we’re just idiots, even bigots.

The Catholic/Nationalist/Republican community

Discussion 7

- There still exists this ludicrous notion among some republicans that if we could only achieve a united Ireland the scales would fall from the Prods' eyes and they'd realise they had been Irish all along. That's a nonsense. I worked with a Protestant guy from Monaghan; he had lived all his life in the Republic. And I asked him one day: 'How do you see yourself?' He says, 'Well, I'm an Irish citizen, a practising member of the Church of Ireland; I have played Gaelic and I'm happy with my Irishness. Yet there is a Britishness within my identity which I am not prepared to deny. My father and two of my grandparents were British and I see part of me as being Briti^osh.' So for forty years the scales had never fallen from *his* eyes.
- When I was a young man I firmly believed I would eventually see the birth of a united Ireland – as a dramatic event with fanfares and speeches and all that. I no longer think like that. A united Ireland, when it does come into being, will come about so gradually that no-one will really notice it happening. I think that all the present nations within the European Union over time will gradually relinquish all the wee differences they have with one another, and we'll all blend together into a totally new relationship. I consider myself to be an Irishman who comes from Europe. My grandkids will probably consider themselves Europeans who come from Ireland.
- There is a lot of talk at the moment about the 'democratic process'. Take the flags issue. Sinn Féin and the SDLP say that it was their democratic right to seek to remove the Union flag. But those two parties also accepted the principle of consent, which states that this is part of the United Kingdom until such time as its people vote otherwise. And, whether republicans like it or not, the national flag of the United Kingdom is the Union flag. Some have suggested that the Tricolour fly alongside the Union flag. Why would you want to do that – unless you wanted to undermine the principle of consent? Unfortunately people here only accept those democratic decisions which suit them and reject the ones that don't.

Some have suggested that the Tricolour fly alongside the Union flag. Why would you want to do that – unless you wanted to undermine the principle of consent? Unfortunately people here only accept those democratic decisions which suit them and reject the ones that don't.

- What *is* identity? I am a republican, I was born on the island of Ireland and consider myself Irish. In the seventeenth century my ancestors were lowland Scots Presbyterians. I come from Planter stock. So what is *my* identity? Because I am Irish, does that mean I have to either play or like Gaelic football? No. But for some people it does. Does it mean I have to speak the language? For some people you are not really Irish unless you can speak Irish, play Gaelic football and all that. That is a load of nonsense. That has politicised Irish culture.
- The Unionist politicians have failed to sell the Good Friday Agreement, to let their followers know that the status of Northern Ireland is copper-fastened, and can only be changed by democratic means. There is no need for this political insecurity. However, the deprivation the Protestant working class complains about *is* real and it's not a million miles away from where it was in nationalist areas in the 1960s. And there is still plenty of deprivation in nationalist areas too. Everything that is wrong on the Newtownards Road is also wrong on the Falls Road, and on the Shankill and in Ardoyne. Probably the worse housing is in the 'Village' [area of South Belfast] where you have people who in the first part of the 21st century still only have outside toilets – which is a total disgrace.
- The irony is that if the security of the Union depends on the majority of the population wanting it, and if the Census says that the Catholic and Protestant populations are drawing closer numerically, the rational thing to do is not to dig your heels in but to open up to make more Catholics want the Union.
- David Ervine made the point: 'How can we convince enough of our Catholic neighbours to vote for the Union, if or when they become a majority in Northern Ireland? They will only do that if they feel contented living within the UK, if they feel equal partners, equally accepted. You will not convince them by tramping all over them.'
- The Protestant working class are lost for people with real leadership qualities, who can articulate their position rationally, and move forward. They also need a political party which truly represents their interests. The mainstream parties can never understand the realities of working-class life. Some of the leading DUP politicians are millionaires. What do they know of working-class life?

Discussion 8

- You're asking about culture. I'll tell you a form of culture which really is expanding: the culture of opportunism. Suddenly there are all these 'experts' running around who profess expertise in getting people together to talk about flags, and symbols, and identity. They want funding for conferences here, workshops there, residential... whatever. I looked at the names of some of the

people proposing to run these events, and they had *never* been involved in this thing before. At least your think tanks and pamphlets have been quietly working away at these issues for years. But these opportunists make me sick.

- If I was a Unionist councillor in Belfast I would have been selling this as a *victory* – that republicans have voted to recognise the Union flag and celebrate the Queen’s birthday. Instead, some of the unionist politicians handled this very cynically and they need to hold their hands up and admit it.
- You also have to ask yourself: is what’s been happening in East Belfast really about flags and identity? A lot of people in our community believe that it’s the UVF moving on to a war footing. Haggarty will be taking to the stand soon with the likelihood that he’ll put the entire UVF leadership behind bars. So, is this mayhem a kind of warning shot over the government’s bows? It’s very dangerous; there’s young lads eager to take over and start things up again, and will want to prove their loyalism by killing a Catholic or a republican. But the same ones never experienced the horror of war. It’s moving into a very serious situation.

• I agree with everyone’s right to protest about what they believe to be attacks on their rights, and we would support that. Loyalists want us to recognise their Britishness, and that’s fair enough. But what about *our Irishness*, or people who say they are neither, or ‘Northern Irish’, or couldn’t be annoyed with any of it? There are so many different strands to identity in this society. Look at the growing Polish population.

Loyalists want us to recognise their Britishness, and that’s fair enough. But what about our Irishness, or people who say they are neither, or ‘Northern Irish’, or couldn’t be annoyed with any of it?

- On the other side of the coin, the flag vote came at a time when the Shinners were well aware of the deep unease in the Protestant community over identity – the events of the summer highlighted that clearly – so *why* did they do it? And why did they have to gloat over it? As the flag was being lowered they filmed it, and put it up on the internet. Why rub people’s noses in it?
- I suppose the unionist majority on Belfast City Council is now gone, and they are going to have to accept that and learn to move on.
- Many unionists refuse to accept change – for them it is still a case of ‘Croppies Lie Down’ and ‘No Taigs Here’. Even when some unionist politicians are speaking on TV you can see how much of a strain it is for them not to lose their middle-class cool and spout about ‘them Fenians!’ You can see the sectarianism in their faces, and hear it in their voices. This is not about equality, this is about dominance, and their anger that that dominance is slowly being consigned to history.
- I have seen this identity thing more with loyalists. It’s as if they are clinging on to something for dear life. And you say to them: ‘But you’re loyal to people who

have no real time for you. Even when you go over to “mother England” you’re still a “Paddy” to them. And Big-House Unionism just exploited your people.’ And they will nod and grudgingly accept the truth of what you are saying, but when they walk away and go back to their own areas, and into their pubs, it’s as if the blinkers fall down again and they have to hang the flag out the window. I have said to them, ‘I am a republican, I am a socialist, I have never flown a Tricolour out my window, I don’t get hung up on all that. And if you say you’re British, that’s okay with me, I don’t get hung up on that either. To me our *working-class identity* should be the one to the fore. We are getting hammered by the cuts, by unemployment, by poor schooling....’ And it’s a frustrating thing. You’re trying to say to loyalists: ‘Look, all our kids are standing at the corners – no hope, no future. Who is going to come along and say: “This has to change, we’re going to help you.” Nobody. Absolutely nobody. Certainly not your Unionist politicians.’ I share [UDA leader] Jackie McDonald’s frustration when he walks through Sandy Row or the Village and sees the conditions of his people. There is nothing for any of those kids. Same as for the kids round here. And last night you saw yet another example of ‘revolutionary justice’ with another young lad shot, the second in two days. And that doesn’t work. I get so frustrated about our inability to come together and do something about all this.

- The immediate problem is: how does this get solved? And will it be a short-term fix? Everybody needs to be in the room. The kids from lower Newtownards Road, Short Strand, the Shankill and the Falls... they all need to have a voice in that room. And we have to say, ‘Well, if flying a Tricolour out your window on Easter Sunday and feeling Irish is really very close to your heart, then that’s okay. Same if it’s an Ulster flag or a Union Jack – that’s okay.’ But, in my personal opinion, when you look at our divisions in a global context they pale into sheer insignificance.

The problem is: how does this get solved? Everybody needs to be in the room. The kids from lower Newtownards Road, Short Strand, the Shankill and the Falls... they all need to have a voice in that room.

- Look, the simple fact is that the republican cause has lost out. When I joined the struggle it was never about getting into talks with the Brits or getting seats in Stormont. So let’s be honest about it: we lost. The UVF will tell you that they brought the IRA to the negotiating table. Yet it makes me laugh when I see these same loyalists on TV shouting about how *they* are losing out! *Republicans* were the ones who lost out – but loyalists don’t seem to be able to see that.

- In the cross-community work we do, the loyalists we normally deal with have been told to pull back from engaging, even the UDA. But when they do that do they not see that that creates suspicion, and even creates problems for us with those of our own members who are not happy at our engagement?

- We have had issues with certain people in the Protestant community saying they now need to go back to doing ‘single identity’ work, that their communities need to be focused on and built up, as they are in a low ebb. But I have argued against that, saying that we need to confront these issues together, collectively.
- See this whole identity thing. Some people say, ‘Look, I just want to get on with my life, this is all shite, the lot of it.’ And you can’t argue against that. But this time things are getting dodgy. You get cycles. The people who were involved get older and want to see an end to it, and that’s where they put their energies. But if they don’t fully succeed then a new generation is growing up in the background and if you can’t bring them with you then they will step into your shoes and start it up again. I know plenty of sectarian headcases who couldn’t quote you a single word of Connolly, they just wanted to get stuck into the Brits or the Prods. We need to engage. You can see from that last meeting which you organised in Farset that things can get a bit hot and heavy, but there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. For it is giving people an opportunity to say: ‘This is why I feel I am British; this is why I feel I am a loyalist..’ or ‘This is why I feel loyal to the Tricolour’ ...whatever. And people can hear each other, and walk away still disagreeing with one another, but having a better understanding of where each other was coming from. And once you can get to that stage – where we at least understand where we each are – then the next stage is: how can we move forward? We can’t keep looking back to a failed past. The reality is that republicanism lost. So, let’s accept that and move on.
- I think many loyalists want to take the city centre back. When I was growing up Catholics didn’t go into the city centre. We had Castle Street and that was our lot. But, even then, you wouldn’t have been in Castle Street after seven o’clock in the evening, not a chance. So now Protestants know that there’s loads of young Catholics down the town, and around Queens, walking about with GAA tops on. And there’s no doubt an element within the Protestant/loyalist community sitting there going: we’ve got to get rid of these boys, get it back to the way it was! The problem is that even some of *our* people would be very content to get back to the way it was. Where they felt comfortable, when they had a status within their communities, their ego was well stroked. I believe that on the republican side there are people walking about now who don’t know what to do with themselves. They’re saying: ‘What was that all about? Ten, fifteen years ago I was looked up to in my area, and when I got out of bed every morning I had a purpose in life. But *now*?’ Even recently, when Short Strand was under attack, our phones in here were never off the hook with people phoning in demanding: ‘What are we going to do about this! Those people over there need our help!’ We could easily go back to a war footing.
- We must explore identity. The national question is tied up with identity. You can’t just thrash out some new *political* arrangement and assume that people will

also relinquish their deep-seated identities. The conflict has changed, but it hasn't ended. We aren't in a *post*-conflict society, we are still in a conflict society; it's just that the way we go about fighting that conflict has changed. At best we are in a *post-armed conflict* society. I think the flag issue highlights the urgent need for a proper debate and engagement. If we are saying that we are on the road to a peaceful, reconciled Ireland, then I need to be able to look across the road and see a Union Jack and not be bothered.

- I think many loyalists imagine that as long as they remain firm in their Britishness, and hold dear to all its symbols, the Union is, like the *Titanic*, 'practically unsinkable'. I think some of these loyalists are actually closet republicans, because nothing serves the republican cause more than an entrenched, sectarian unionism. Republicans won't admit to it openly, but many are unsettled by the growing number of Catholics who no longer see themselves as purely 'Irish'. And the actions of dissident republicans can only accelerate that trend. The *only* people who can put a halt to it are the Unionist people themselves.

Discussion 9

- To be honest, I think identity is a load of crap. I hate being in a room where people are singing or playing their national anthem – *any* national anthem. The Christian Brothers sold us a national identity which was about as useful as a fart, it was pathetic. It was shamrocks and harps and all things green, and it was absolutely empty and meaningless. At least the identity that republicanism was selling – which the Christian Brothers would have opposed utterly – had an element of self-empowerment about it.

- When I became politically conscious in my teens – you're talking late eighties – republicanism was embracing the politics of identity quite strongly. I think it was a means to keep up morale, because when you have a military occupation of your country it makes sense to encourage notions of national identity among the people who are resisting that occupation. But I think a lot of younger people who supported the war against the British Army were too young to ever question what that national identity was, we just accepted that there was this thing called Irishness, and we embraced it as part of a pro-active patriotism, which itself was a reaction to the hundreds of British troops on our streets. At the same time you could never quite pin down what it actually was. There was this notion that over the centuries the British had suppressed different aspects of our national identity, and we were going to reclaim it. So you had this embracing of Celtic symbols, Gaelic symbols, Cúchulainn... as if within all this there was some sort of untapped knowledge that Britain had denied us. There was a war going on which, perhaps in my naivety, I thought was *solely* about national identity; that that was what it was: get the Saxon out of Ireland, because that's what all the songs said.

- How pervasive was this ‘Celtic’ identity among republicans?
- The Provos were really promoting it, there were murals jumping out at you of the ‘Ulster cycle’ and the ancient legends. There were IRA T-shirts on sale sporting Cúchulainn images and all that. Then I met some socialists who had been in the IRA in the seventies, and they said there was none of that going on then: in 1970-71 the average Provo was more oriented towards the defence of their community than the politics of identity. This Celtic nationalist thing, Sinn Féin’s involvement in fleadh’s and the Cultúrllaan, the emergence of Celtic-themed murals, Glór na nGael, the explosion of the language in the H-Blocks, the bunscoils and all that – not that these things were negative in any way – really indicated where republicanism was going. It was moving away from radical community politics and into tribal politics of a more nationalist orientation.
- Were you disenchanted with all this?
- Having originally subscribed to this notion of an Irish identity, years later I went looking for it and realised that I couldn’t find it, it just wasn’t there. Was it to be found in the music? In the language? Where was this Irish identity which was supposedly unique to us? It was only after some years, and especially when I travelled outside Ireland and met ordinary people in different countries – especially people involved in their own revolutionary struggles – that I realised that those aspects of people here which I valued most were to be found in people everywhere, and that the myth of something unique about the Irish identity was just that – a myth. People all over the world had a similar humanity and faced identical problems. The Irish separatist movement had highlighted and utilised symbols and imagery for propaganda purposes, as if we were unique – but we weren’t different from other people, and our struggles certainly weren’t different. But looking at it now, for republicanism to have decided to meet reactionary Protestant/loyalist culture with their own form of national patriotism was short-sighted. Let’s face it, once you entrench yourself in a patriotic nationalist camp, the only way to win out over an equally entrenched and solid patriotic camp – in this case the ‘British’ camp – is genocide, and that’s not an option. But what was that to do with true republicanism, which is all about creating a new relationship between people within society, *irrespective* of their religious or cultural backgrounds. Republicanism should have been above any narrow patriotic identity.

But what was that to do with true republicanism, which is all about creating a new relationship between people within society, irrespective of their religious or cultural backgrounds. Republicanism should have been above any narrow patriotic identity.

- Active republicans, those who have been active in the struggle will very quickly notice that out in the community those who wrap the flag around themselves

and really embrace their nationalism are often those who have contributed least to the struggle. Maybe those of us who were active and went to jail or whatever got our romance knocked out of us, but there is definitely an element in this community who will stand to attention for the national anthem, or put flags out at Easter, and I think to a large extent they are compensating for not having actually participated in the struggle.

- That mirrors what was said by some loyalist community workers in the last pamphlet. They called them ‘SuperProds’ or ‘SuperLoyalists’ – people who never do a thing for their community all year, yet come the Twelfth they wrap the Union flag around them and, carry-outs in hand, become SuperProds. But they don’t do a single positive thing for their community.
- That’s interesting, for I have never thought of that from the other side of the fence: the fact that those making the most noise with their Union Jacks are probably the ones doing the least for their communities. That is the case here. Some of us cringe when we see this Celtic football culture, this fan culture, which is massive in West Belfast. We get mobs of young men all chanting rebel songs, all with Tricolours, all chanting ‘IRA!’ Yet you wouldn’t recruit one of them into your organisation, because they don’t want to know about the politics of republicanism, they don’t want to hear your plans to reach out across the peacewalls to the Protestants. They don’t even want to hear the arguments for Irish unity, they just want to chant ‘IRA!’ What all this symbolises for me is the failure of identity politics, to the point where it is actually *anti*-republican. And some of the worst anti-social hoods and criminals are buying into this, and they *hate* republicans. They have almost hijacked republican imagery and turned it into some football hooligan fetish, and exploited the sacrifices of republican activists. And it is massive; these people would far outnumber republican activists. If I go up to the Rock Bar on a Saturday when Celtic is playing I will see 200 fervent nationalists all carrying Tricolours, all up singing *Séan South* – and yet if I try to collect for the Maghaberry prisoners I will be told ‘f**k off!’ I’d be laughed at, because it’s too real: ‘We’re having a party here, we’re going to use your songs, we’re going to use your images, but we don’t actually mean any of it. So don’t try to spoil our party.’ That’s the other train of culture.

Discussion 10

- How does identity come into the equation? I am trying to establish how the republican movement views identity; firstly, in terms of the *causes* of our conflict, and secondly, in terms of its *resolution*, moving forward to a shared future. Does Sinn Féin just see it solely as a political problem or is identity a factor?
- It’s actually a potentially interesting discussion, but I would be of the opinion

that republicans haven't necessarily argued and worked out a position on it. Certainly at *Coiste* we haven't worked out any particularly strong line on it one way or the other. Republicans, in general, see ourselves on a journey; we see ourselves moving forward and growing in confidence and in political strength. Whereas with Unionism you have the opposite happening. Unionism, by its very nature, is a reactionary politics. If you look at our history, all political change that has been attempted has been resisted by the various shades of unionism; they see themselves as in a redoubt, always feeling under siege.

- But that's why I was asking about the role of identity. If, in the republican analysis, the conflict here is viewed as a purely *political* problem, then I can understand republicans being bewildered by unionists not wanting to engage – even for their own political benefit.

But if, *behind* the politics, and despite the best intentions of the most progressive people within unionism, there exists an identity problem which is not being addressed – indeed, not even being acknowledged – then it seems inevitable that a purely political engagement will lead nowhere.

- If you go to the City Cemetery and look at the pre-Partition graves, there is the grave of one Rutledge Kane. He was a fluent Irish speaker, and the wording on the gravestone is in Irish. It says he was a 'Loyal Irish Patriot'. He was loyal, he was a patriot, but he was also Irish. So, this sense of feeling 'British only' did not really come into the whole cultural perspective of unionism until after Partition. There were many people at that time who, while seeing themselves as unionists, and were loyal to the Queen, also saw themselves as Irish.

- Okay, Rutledge Kane was an Orangeman who was very much an Irishman. However, if you recall a couple of years ago Sinn Féin members of Limavady council drew up a list of some of the things they wanted removed from the council property [*see footnote page 10*]. And some of the items were definitely 'British': the 'Charles and Di' cup, the souvenirs from the British regiments.... But they *also* wanted the statue of William Massey, the local Orangeman who became prime minister of New Zealand, moved from the grounds. It is understandable republicans wanting to remove the 'British' items, but Massey was an Irishman. Why was *he* not acceptable? Was it because he was the *wrong type* of Irishman?

- I am not going to attempt to defend the actions of everybody on the nationalist/republican side. For example, one of the things which gets on my wick is the way the Celtic football team in Glasgow has come to epitomise Irish republicanism – it doesn't make sense to me. But it does for all sorts of young people in nationalist

Unionism, by its very nature, is a reactionary politics. If you look at our history, all political change that has been attempted has been resisted by the various shades of unionism; they see themselves as in a redoubt, always feeling under siege.

working-class areas of not only Belfast and Derry but throughout Ireland; they have a massive following. But somehow or other that has become tied up with Irish republicanism, and I can't really understand why. I am one of the people who volunteers to attempt to reduce tension on interfaces during the parading period, and the most serious incident I experienced during the summer was when some Celtic supporters from Ardoyne started to banter the loyalist marchers who were going down the road, and it was all about Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers! What has that got to do with what is happening here?

- The whole unionist agenda is about stopping my community from getting to a place of equality. Someone asked me recently why we went ahead with the City Hall vote [on the Union flag] when we did. Change is made by people with vision, who have a project, and there is never a right time to do this. You cannot allow the most reactionary sections of your community to dictate when is the best time to introduce change.
- Okay, change is inevitable, and has to be driven, but can it be driven *more effectively* in a *process* that engages one's opponents? For example, John Burton's Basic Human Needs Theory holds that the only way to satisfy one's own needs is to assist one's enemy to satisfy theirs. But there is no process here which allows both sides to achieve their aspirations through dialogue with one another.
- I would agree totally. The problem is that *we* are the people who want to see change and are prepared to engage in that dialogue, whereas unionism in general is resistant to change and will *not* engage.
- To go back to your question about identity, I believe that for people of a nationalist/republican background there is a whole mosaic in terms of people from our community who are very passionate about the Irish language, very passionate about the GAA, and the music, and Irish dancing and everything else. There are others where it is more a 'mix and match'. In fact, for the majority within the nationalist/republican community it is probably a mix and match: there's an affinity with the language and the GAA, but I also know many IRA people who would rather sit and watch Spurs and Leeds in an FA cup-match than watch Kerry and Dublin playing in the all-Ireland final. And that's just the way we are.
- The last Census talked about a large section of the population who now regard themselves as 'Northern Irish', and undoubtedly a lot of them are young people from a nationalist background. But while they don't feel any particular affinity with the South, they don't necessarily consider themselves as British. The fact is that they are at ease with their identity, one which doesn't make them feel exclusive – it's actually the opposite – it just means they are as likely to take themselves away for a weekend to Liverpool as they are to Dublin; And that's why I said this to you at the start – I don't think republicans have had this sort of debate in terms of identity and all that.

Discussion 11

(an interview with Declan Kearney, Sinn Féin national chairperson)

- What significance would Sinn Féin put on ‘identity’ as a factor in terms of both the *genesis* of the conflict here, and in working towards a shared future?

- Identity clearly is linked and embedded into the conflict resolution process that we are involved with, and I have made it very explicit in the media that Sinn Féin is resolved to guaranteeing the Irish and British identities in the North. We acknowledge and recognise that a large section of the unionist/loyalist/Protestant community owe allegiance to some form of Britishness, and a unionist political identity and ethos. We would argue that we need to begin to build a reconciliation process, on the basis of a real engagement on a whole series of issues, not just those which underpin the current impasse, but the broader realities within our society. And they include the need for parity of esteem, mutual respect and equality, which are all applicable to the question of identity.

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- Protestant/loyalist perception seems to be that, despite all the talk of ‘parity of esteem’, the reality is that their British identity and its symbols are losing out to the advancement of the Irish identity and *its* symbols.

- In truth, parity of esteem in Belfast City Hall with regard to flags would in fact mean that the Irish national flag and the British union flag should be give a co-equal status. That is not how the process outworked, but there was a compromise struck which republicans and nationalists accepted. The decision to observe designated days in Belfast City Hall represents a democratic compromise. In objective terms probably 90% of all the paraphernalia and the symbols within Belfast City Hall still reflect a British and a Unionist ethos.

The concepts of parity of esteem and mutual respect were all instituted in the wording of the Good Friday Agreement. What we have never had is a dialogue about what the *outworking of those concepts* should mean for our society. The major difficulty over efforts to bring about that dialogue is that the two main unionist parties clearly did not buy into the outworkings of the Good Friday Agreement. The failure of political unionism to engender a momentum of support for the Good Friday Agreement within its own community feeds into the misperception that nationalist and republican symbolism and identity are now in the ascendancy

to the detriment of the unionist and British identity. Our position is very simple: this is a divided society, and we are in an ongoing conflict resolution process. We have struck an accommodation which allows for a *political coexistence* between those who wish to see the maintenance of the Union, and those who would wish to see the reunification of Ireland. What we now have to do is work out how we can give effect to the expressions and the sense of identity that exists within *each* community. Now, *we* are coming at that in a very self-confident way, but we are also coming at it in a very sensitive way. At the same time it has to be acknowledged that the driving force behind the unionist reaction over the flag vote was fundamentally a backlash against change in our society and against the democratic outworking of the Good Friday Agreement. Our vision is of a desegregated, integrated society. That will take time to achieve. But what has to happen in a very robust, systematic way, is an eradication of sectarianism within both unionism and nationalism.

- Many Protestants/loyalists/unionists express scepticism about Sinn Féin intentions. How can you convince them otherwise?
- The answer to that brings us back to the starting point: there has to be a new form of dialogue, and new types of thinking. We have a political accommodation and a framework which provides for our political co-existence, and confers legitimacy upon both the allegiance to remain with the Union, and the allegiance to achieve a united Ireland. Now we need to see a new phase of the peace process opening up, founded on new types of dialogue, new types of engagement. But there has to be a willingness to participate in that. And what we saw in December was political unionism stirring things up with their 40,000 leaflets. One loyalist described it as yet another example of the ‘Grand Old Duke of York’ approach – marching their followers to the top of the hill. But then, when they saw how badly it was all going, they stepped aside at the summit and slipped away down the back of the hill, leaving their people directionless and leaderless. It is also essential to understand that the Good Friday Agreement and its key precepts have never been hard-wired into the consciousness of the Protestant/loyalist/unionist people, because there has been a failure of leadership on the part of political unionism to explain it to them in a positive way.

If we were to reduce everything down to credits and debits, on the debit side nationalists and republicans could point to a range of issues which have yet to be delivered on – such as a Bill of Rights, Acht na Gaeilge (Irish Language Act)... – issues which remain unfulfilled, which were agreed by the two governments, and in negotiations involving the main unionist parties. But that is the zero-sum approach and that takes us nowhere fast. We need to break that cycle and look collectively at what will be best for our society in the here and now, and what will be best for future generations. The issue is how you manage change. Change is happening all around us, and the 3rd December vote [on the Union flag] was a manifestation of that. But there has to be a recognition that change *is* taking

place, and secondly, that it is preferable that it is managed collectively.

- Change in and of itself will certainly move us to a *different* future, but it will not necessarily take us to a *shared* future; at best it might be a *shared-out* future. Would you agree that any process of engagement would need to have, as a primary focus, movement towards a shared future?
- Change based on equality, and a transforming society which is based on parity of esteem and mutual respect, is a solid foundation upon which to continue the process of change. But those concepts are currently not mutually agreed and political unionism wants to stand off any discussion around them, because fundamentally they don't subscribe to what equality needs to mean for *all* sides in this society. There needs to be a respect for an Irish and an nationalist and a republican identity as well as for a unionist or a loyalist or a British identity. That's what we need to fix politically and that can only be addressed through dialogue. We have never had that type of dialogue before, and it is about creating new relationships by which we can work out – having established what the foundations must be – a new phase of the peace process, and what direction of travel we take, without prejudice to preferred constitutional outcomes.
- In terms of what has happened recently, what impact did it have on Sinn Féin? Did any warning lights come on with regard to Sinn Féin's own approach?
- What it demonstrated for all of us is that *no-one* can take the peace process for granted, because there are wreckers and militarists within both unionism and nationalism who would attempt to push back what has been achieved, however imperfect what has been achieved to date. This is a time for more engagement, and for ensuring that lines of communication remain open and that we work out together how we move forward. The events of past weeks have given us a glimpse of potentially what can happen – the potential for going back into the abyss. And that should reinforce *everyone's* resolve to ensure that we have a forward direction of travel, that we don't go backwards. We have to accept and respect that there are different identities within the North, and if we can accept a form of political co-existence between republicanism and unionism then we ought to be able to work out how we give co-equal expression to both British and Irish identities. Now, Sinn Féin is absolutely committed to taking that process of discussion forward, with whomsoever is prepared to engage with us.

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Overview

Whatever one's stance on the current 'flag protests', they have nevertheless highlighted the urgent need to move the 'peace process' up a gear and engage collectively in meaningful dialogue on ways of reconciling our conflicting and competing identities – and, in the process, hopefully exploring the many aspects of those identities which we share in common.

In the course of my discussions with people from the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community (and not just for the purposes of this pamphlet), responses seem to fall along a continuum. At one end are those individuals who have a strong sense of what their Protestantism and Britishness stands for – politically, historically and culturally. These individuals feel the *least threatened* by any talk that their identity could be taken away from them; indeed, some are openly sceptical of such a scenario. At the other end are those individuals who do not possess this deeper understanding, and for whom *symbols* (such as the Union flag) form the bedrock of their identity. This group feels the *most threatened*. This has a certain logic to it, for symbols *can* be taken away, and without that deeper understanding of one's identity many people can be left feeling extremely vulnerable.

What this also indicates is that there is clearly a job of work to be done within the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community not only in protecting against any diminution – real or perceived – of their identity, but in educating people as to its core values, and its historical and cultural significance.

During my discussions with people from the Catholic/nationalist/republican community it was evident – and openly admitted – that up to now the question of 'conflicting identities' has not been accorded the in-depth analysis it clearly requires. Republicans view Partition and its legacy as a largely political matter and not an identity-related issue, but – for the sake of opening up debate – perhaps they should reflect on a comment made some years ago by Queens University lecturer Boyd Black: that two communities with divergent identities *already existed* in 1920, and Partition was not so much a *political* reality imposed by Britain, but a *social* reality imposed upon Britain. No doubt Sinn Féin would strongly contest such an assertion, but questions still persist: what role did divergent identities play in our conflict, why do they *continue* to play such a role, and how do we, first of all, acknowledge their importance within the conflict resolution process, and, secondly, begin a dialogue through which we can work towards genuine reconciliation, or at least a non-threatening accommodation?

Michael Hall